

“Too Foreign for Here, Too Foreign for Home”: The Korean Diaspora and “Returning” Nikkei Brazilians in Japan

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Preface

This paper is dedicated to my dear friend and colleague, Professor Ulises Granados Quiroz, who was taken away from us suddenly in 2021. He was one of my friends that I looked up to (in Japanese we have a word “senpai,” which means mentor), who finished his post-graduate degree in Japan and paved the way for foreign scholars in Japan. He was always concerned with stability and peace in East Asia, and though his expertise was on Sino-Japanese relations, he was always attentive to various issues including migration, minorities and social inclusion in East Asia. This article stems from a paper that I originally prepared for a panel I organized at the International Political Science Association (IPSA) conference in Brisbane, Australia, in 2018, where Professor Granados eagerly agreed to sit as a discussant. At the time of the conference, it was still a work in progress, but since then I have developed it into this article, which I would like to dedicate to my friend, Professor Ulises Granados. I would like to thank him for all his valuable comments that motivated me to finish this paper, but more than that, I want to thank him for his kindness, warmth, and friendship. I still cannot believe that he is not with us, but he still lives in our hearts and memories. In memory of Prof. Ulises Granados, *te extraño mi amigo*.

Introduction

The headline in the *Nikkei Asian Review*, “Foreigners in Japan hit record as Tokyo rolls out welcome mat” was one of the many similar articles that hit the internet in the latter half of 2019, a few months after Japan’s new legislation and revision to its immigration control law. The number of foreigners in Japan reached 2.83 million in 2019, which is an increase of 192,000 from the previous year. The increase in foreign workers in Japan is due to various reasons, but one of the major factors include the lack of labour from the shrinking of the working population, due to Japan’s rapid aging society and low birth rate. However, what is less known to the public is that the Japanese government’s ulterior motive is “to leverage immigration in its campaign to revitalize depopulated regions.”

Japan has long been regarded as a country with tight immigration control, and without an active migration policy. Even during the diet deliberation concerning the new legislation and revision to the immigration control law, Prime Minister Abe had repeatedly mentioned, “It is not our intention to implement an active migration policy. This policy is to accept foreign human resources for a fixed period as measures to fill in the serious lack of labour[1].” Moreover, he stated, “We do not intend to maintain our nation by bringing in foreign migrants and their families. Please do not confuse this policy as an active migration policy that encourages permanent settlement of foreign migrants[2].”

However, another lingering agenda has resurfaced in Japan—that is the issue of how to integrate generations of the “old comers” and “newcomers” to Japan. One of the largest migrant communities of old comers to Japan is the *Zainichi Korean* or the ethnic Koreans who came to Japan after the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 and stayed even after the end of the second World War. This paper will also look at how the Japanese government and the people are “struggling” to integrate those who have Japanese heritage, the *Nikkei Brazilians*

who have “returned” to Japan to find work, though, however, in recent years have sought to settle permanently in Japan.

This paper will first examine the brief history of Japan’s Immigration Control Law, the revisions to the law and the discussions and arguments that have resulted from this new revision. Secondly, the paper will discuss the various challenges that the Zainichi Korean and Nikkei Brazilians face today. Lastly, the paper will examine the various policies implemented by the central and local governments that have attempted to address the challenges but have not resulted in any major paradigm shift in terms of integrating foreign migrants to Japan.

New Legislation and Revision to the Immigration Control Law

On December 8, 2018, the Japanese parliament passed a controversial bill in the upper house to revise the immigration control law so that Japan could accept blue collar (non-skilled) workers, despite protests from the opposition party. The bill had already passed in the lower house in November. With the lack of details in many areas, including which business sectors will be allowed to hire foreign workers, how many will be accepted and whether they will be eligible for social services, the new law was rushed and enacted on April 1, 2019. The enactment of this new law came as a surprise as Japan has been regarded as not having an active immigration policy and the Japanese government has repeatedly announced that Japan will not accept blue-collar workers. This section will examine the background to the enactment of the new law, the content of the new law and what it entails, the potential challenges to this new law.

Background to the New Revision

Before the recent revision to the immigration control law, foreigners who could work in Japan can be categorized into the following: highly skilled workers or those with specified knowledge and professional skills (university professors, scientists, lawyers); people with certain legal positions such as foreign spouses married to Japanese nationals, people with Japanese heritage (Nikkei-Brazilians), and foreign permanent residents (Zainichi Koreans as well as those who obtained residency); people who engage in certain types of paid work based on bilateral agreements signed between Japan and related countries (care workers and nurses under the Economic Partnership Agreement); trainees on the Technical Internship Training Programme (TITP); and those who have obtained permission to engage in activities outside their immigration status (international students who work part-time).

The Japanese government implemented several new immigration statuses, including the trainee status and the long-term residency status for people with Japanese heritage, in its first ever revision to the immigration control law in 1990. The rationale behind the first revision was to compensate for the labour shortage that Japan was experiencing during its economic growth. Though the technical trainees were not considered to be “workers” to fill in the gap, but rather Japan’s way of transferring skills and technology to developing countries, in reality the trainees did fill in the labour shortage in unskilled work. Moreover, the long-term residency status was implemented to bring in the Nikkei-Brazilians who are looking for work in Japan, and even though there are no limitations on what type of work they can work in, many Nikkei-Brazilians work in less-skilled jobs such as assembly lines, factories and food services. In the 1990s, the labour shortage was mainly due to the segmented labour market in which many highly educated young Japanese people refused to work in low and less-skilled jobs.

However, in light of Japan becoming an aging society, Japan has implemented various

institutions to bring in foreign workers to its country, including the acceptance of care workers and nurses from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam as part of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in 2008, 2009 and 2014, respectively, and the Technical Intern Training Programme in 2017. These institutions enabled Japan to bring in care workers and nurses to compensate for the labour shortage particularly in the care industry, as well as continue bringing in technical interns (formerly the trainees) to work in unskilled work. The Japanese government was preparing for the actual coming labour shortage as the working population from the baby boomer generation was reaching retirement age.

Behind the latest revision and implementation of the new law is a strong push from certain business sectors in Japan that are suffering from a serious labour shortage due to not only the rapidly graying but also declining population[3]. Japan is experiencing an unusually low birthrate as it hit 1.26 in 2005 and recovering slightly at 1.42 in 2018. In 2017, the Cabinet Office announced that Japan has a shortage of 1.2 million in labour intensive industries such as food and hospitality services, manufacturing, construction, agriculture and fishing.

Challenges to the New Law

As mentioned above, one of the main reasons for implementing this new law was to fill in the acute labour shortage, but also to minimize some of the serious problems with TITP, such as long working hours, extremely low-wages, harassment and abuse. This is due to the lack of worker oversight; therefore, the new law will allow worker oversight to big private job-placement agencies that could manage large numbers of people more efficiently and professionally. Under the TITP, worker oversight was delegated to the chamber of commerce, trade union and agricultural cooperatives which some have pointed out that, “it put corporate profits first and are not fulfilling their oversight responsibilities.” However, even though the TITP has faced serious criticisms, the Japanese Government has announced to continue the program alongside the new visa statuses. It is still unclear as to how the Japanese government will manage the two programmes, how much improvement there will be with the new visa statuses and whether worker oversight will be further enforced.

The Japanese government has repeatedly announced that the revision and the implementation of new visa statuses are not the implementation of immigration policy nor accepting non-skilled workers, but to utilize talented and skilled human resources from abroad. Prime Minister Abe stated, “the entire country is short of workers, and the new system is needed for talented foreigners to further contribute to Japan” and that the government will “set clear caps on the numbers (of additional foreign workers) and limit the period (they can stay in Japan),” insisting that the new measures do not constitute a policy to accept foreign immigration[4]. The “non-existence” of an active immigration policy means that Japan still lacks not only the administrative and support structures but also has yet to implement policies for integrating foreign migrants to Japanese society. However, some have a more optimistic view of the new revisions. Mr. Toshiro Menju, Director of the Japan Centre for International Exchange, stated:

“This is a historic shift, worthy of being called ‘the year immigration began,’ and Japan is the only developed country without an immigration policy, and in that sense our stubbornness had reached its limit. The reason why the government does not refer to this as an immigration policy is due to concern for the negative image people have towards the word ‘immigration.’ The biggest success of this new policy was creating an opportunity for a national discussion

of immigration policy, which had been taboo until now. It would be necessary in the future to decide whether to eliminate the Technical Intern Training Program, the reality of which has diverged from its supposed intent, or to limit it to its original goal of international cooperation[5].”

Zainichi Koreans and Nikkei Brazilians: Challenges in Contemporary Japan

As mentioned earlier, the Japanese government revised the Immigration Control and Refugee Law and implemented new visa statuses as measures to fill in labour shortages. With this revision, in 1990 and in 2019, there has been a considerable increase in migrant workers; however, this has reinitiated the debate on how to integrate the two largest migrant communities, that is, the Zainichi Koreans and Nikkei Brazilians. This section will attempt to first, examine the background, history and current situation of the Zainichi Koreans and Nikkei Brazilians.

Zainichi Koreans

Zainichi Koreans or ethnic Koreans “moved” to Japan after the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910. At the time, the ethnic Koreans were subjects of Imperial Japan and were given Japanese nationality. By 1938, some 800,000 Koreans had migrated to Japan, and from 1939-1945, many Koreans were forced to move to Japan to work. Ever since 1939, the Japanese Imperial Government had enforced assimilation policies, such as enforcement of Japanese names (総氏改名 or Soshi-kamei). After the end of the Second World War, many Koreans repatriated, but 500,000 to 600,000 Koreans stayed in Japan. The primary reasons for staying in Japan were socio-economic” and the division of the two “Koreas”. The Korean community was divided along the lines of the division of the motherland, and two communities: the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (在日本朝鮮人連合總會 or Soren, those who affiliate with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) and the Korean Residents Union in Japan (在日本大韓国民団 or Mindan, those who affiliate with the Republic of Korea) were established in 1946 and 1948, respectively. Zainichi Koreans were given residency status after the war, but formally lost their Japanese nationality in 1952 with the signing of the San Francisco Treaty.

The Zainichi Koreans are divided along the lines in the motherland. Since the normalization of Japan and Korea’s diplomatic relations in 1965, the Zainichi Koreans who affiliate themselves with the ROK hold South Korean passport; however, since Japan and the DPRK do not have diplomatic ties, the Zainichi Koreans who affiliate with the DPRK are “stateless” in Japan.

The Zainichi Koreans have faced implicit and direct discrimination in Japanese society. However, with the increase in the popularity of the Korean wave, discrimination has decreased to some extent. However, many still face the challenge of mainstreaming into Japanese society, especially those who affiliate with the DPRK. One of the major issues facing them is the Korean ethnic schools or chosen gakko. While the Korean ethnic schools can establish their curriculum freely, the school itself is not recognized by Japanese education law. Therefore, the diplomas of students graduating from this school are not recognized; therefore, these students cannot enter Japanese university without taking the secondary school equivalency test to obtain eligibility to sit the university entrance exam. However, many students opt not to take this equivalency test because its double the burden on them. These students then enroll in a Korean ethnic university or chosen daigako, which is also not recognized by the Japanese government. Therefore, it makes it impossible for them to mainstream, because they are not able to obtain jobs at Japanese

companies (because they are deemed not to have a university diploma), and instead take over their family business of Korean barbeque restaurants or pachinko parlours (pinball machines).

Nikkei (People with Japanese Heritage) on Long-Term Residency Visa

The Japanese government revised the Immigration Control and Refugees Law in 1990, and one of the major changes included the implementation of the long-term residency visa for Nikkei or people with Japanese heritage. The majority of people holding this visa include Nikkei Brazilians, who “came back” to Japan to seek employment during Japan’s bubble economy. At the time, Japan desperately needed to fill in the labour gap especially in non-skilled or 3D (dirty, difficult and dangerous) work, even though the long-term residency visa allows them to work in any industry.

Many Nikkei Brazilians have worked in logistics, manufacturing plants and factories of electronics and electric equipment, and live in public housings with their family. In the past, there was a clash between the local Japanese residents and Nikkei Brazilians as they started to share living spaces in public housing, often time due to the difference in culture and living habits. Many local governments were forced to face the challenges of implementing measures to ease the tension between the two communities, as well as provide public services, Japanese language education and other services. In the past, Nikkei Brazilians were considered to be “temporary visitors” (dekasegi in Japanese); therefore, even though the Japanese central government created a new visa category specific for those with Japanese heritage, they failed to provide other services necessary for them to settle in Japan. However, in recent years, many Nikkei Brazilians are settling permanently in Japan; thus, the local governments are under pressure to implement their own policies to tackle the issues at hand.

Policies Concerning the Acceptance of Migrants

This section will examine the various policies concerning the acceptance of migrants initiated by local governments.

Guideline of Acceptance of Migrants Through the Collaboration of Local Governments (2001~)

In the 1990s, with the increase of Nikkei Brazilians in various cities in Japan, local governments decided to collaborate and create joint guidelines on accepting migrants to their community. Thus, in 2001, local municipalities established the “Council for Cities of Non-Japanese Residents (Gaikokujin Shuju Toshi Kaigi)” in order to “create a diverse community composed of people with various background.” It began as a council for exchanging and sharing policy ideas, and even making policy recommendations to the national government.

Promotion of Multicultural Coexistence Plan and Measures by Local Governments (2006)

When the number of foreign residents in Japan hit 2 million in 2005, the Ministry of Internal Affairs notified all local governments to devise guidelines for the acceptance of foreign residents in each respective local municipality. More precisely, the ministry requested that local municipalities design a plan for the “promotion of multicultural coexistence,” following the guidelines proposed by the ministry. This included the following three items: 1) supporting the communication between the local Japanese residents and foreign residents; 2) supporting the lives of foreign residents; 3) community building for diverse and multicultural coexistence. The ministry also requested that each local government implement policies to accept foreign

residents and collaborate with external organizations, such as non-profit organizations and international exchange associations.

As of 2019, only 6% of all local municipalities have implemented an independent plan for the promotion of multicultural coexistence. Many municipalities have included aspects of the plan into their general plan or as part of their internationalization plan. Some small sized municipalities do not even have any plans to establish or implement such policies.

Effect of Depopulation and Regional Revitalization (2010~)

In 2010, the effect of population decline due to Japan's aging society and low birth rate started to influence the guidelines on accepting migrants into Japan. In 2014, the Japan Policy Council announced that in the near future, some regional cities would "completely disappear" with the rapid depopulation. Following this announcement, Prime Minister Abe publicly announced the "General Strategy for Revitalizing Cities, People and Jobs" and requested that local municipalities establish new targets to increase its population and to create new opportunities to attract more people.

The Outcome of Such Policies and Case Studies

This section will examine two case studies of local municipalities that have implemented innovative policies to accept foreign migrants. One is Hamamatsu City in Shizuoka prefecture, home to the biggest Nikkei Brazilians community in Japan. The second case is Tsuruhashi in Ikuno-ku, Osaka, which is one of the largest Zainichi Korean communities in Japan.

Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture

The total population of Hamamatsu is 810,000, of which 23,000 are foreign residents (2.9% of the total population). It is home to the biggest Nikkei Brazilian community in Japan, where 39% of the total foreign residents are Brazilian, followed by 16% Filipino and 11% Chinese. One of the reason Hamamatsu is a popular destination for migrant workers is because many logistics and electronics companies have their plants and factories in Hamamatsu. The number of migrant workers in 1988 was merely 2,700; however, in 1992 this number increased to 11,000 and peaked in 2008 at 33,000.

Hamamatsu City played an active role in founding the Council for Cities of Non-Japanese Residents and has implemented its original and unique policies for foreigners, which has been included in the "2nd Hamamatsu Multicultural Coexistence City Vision (2018-2022)". In this vision, the main directions include: 1) constructing the community together with residents with diverse background; 2) developing the community by utilizing diversity; 3) accepting people into the community so that everyone can live in a safe and comfortable environment.

The city has outsourced many of its projects to the Hamamatsu Foundation for International Communication and Exchange (HICE). The two main pillars of HICE include the operation and management of the Hamamatsu Intercultural Centre and the operation and management of Hamamatsu Foreign Resident Study Support Centre. The Hamamatsu Intercultural Centre was established in 1992 and is responsible for multilingual consultation, disaster prevention and relief. The Hamamatsu Foreign Resident Study Support Centre was established in 2010, and is responsible for operating a Japanese language course, as well as supporting children with school, mental health, and finding jobs in order to decrease unemployment of foreigners living in Hamamatsu.

Tsuruhashi, Ikuno-ku, Osaka Prefecture

The area of Tsuruhashi in Ikuno-ku, Osaka, is home to one of the largest Korean communities in Japan. This area is known as K-town or Korean Town. The reason for the high percentage of ethnic Koreans in this area dates back to the colonial days, where there was a regular ferry from Busan to Osaka, and many Koreans came to this area to live and work.

Currently there are over 20,000 Zainichi Koreans living in this area. It is home to the largest concentration of Korean barbecue restaurants as well as other ethnic Korean businesses. The Ikuno ward office, as well as various NPOs like the Japan-Korea Cultural Exchange Association or Ikuno Multicultural Flat host outreach programmes to connect the local Japanese and Korean communities, as well as provide language support and multilingual consultation.

In the two case studies above, one can see efforts being made by local government and local entities, but the crucial problem is that the discussion on how to integrate foreign migrants, old and new, is still very premature, and the central government has not taken much initiative to lead the discussion. The reason lies with the belief in Japan that its people are homogenous [6]. The recurring hate crimes, as well as the marginalization of minorities are very much prevalent in Japan. The interesting point here is that marginalization takes place with not only the Zainichi Korean but also the Nikkei Brazilians, who have Japanese heritage. There is still much work to be done in order to integrate foreign migrants into Japanese society.

[1] “Shuin Daihyo Shitsumon: Nyukanhou Kaiseian ni Shusho Imin Seisaku toru kangae nai [Questions at the House of Representatives regarding the revision to the Immigration Control Law, Prime Minister does not intend to implement active migration policy],” *Mainichi Shimbun*, October 29, 2018. <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20181030/k00/00m/010/072000c>

[2] “Imin, Mewo Somukeru Shusho-Gaikokujin no Shin Zairyu Shikakuan futsukani Kagugi Kettei, Teigi Aimai, Susumanu Giron [Prime Minister turns his eye away from migration: Cabinet decision on the 2nd regarding the new visa status for migrant workers, definition is ambiguous, not enough deliberation],” *Nishinippon Shimbun*, November 2, 2018. https://www.nishinippon.co.jp/feature/new_immigration_age/article/462334/

[3] Haruki Deguchi, “A New Immigration Policy for Japan,” *The Japan Times*, December 4, 2018. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/12/04/commentary/japan-commentary/new-immigration-policy-japan/#.XRpelvZuLMR>

[4] Naoki Oita and Jun Aoki, “Abe Reiterates Need to Accept More Foreign Workers in April Next Year,” *The Mainichi Newspapers*, December 11, 2018. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20181211/p2a/00m/0na/004000c>

[5] Toshihiro Menju, “Imin ‘Gannen’ Kadai to Tenbo [Immigration Year One: Prospects and Challenges],” *Sekai* 918 (2019), 27–30.

[6] Eiji Oguma, *Tanitsu Minzoku Shinwa no Kigen: “Nihonjin” no Jigazo no Keifu [A Genealogy of «Japanese» Self-Images]* (Tokyo: Shinyosha, 1995).

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